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Brendan Hoban

The synodal pathway in Killala diocese, 2017-2022

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By luck (or perhaps, more accurately, providentially), Killala¹ diocese stumbled on the concept of synodality. It was back in 2015, even before Pope Francis had refined what seemed a new and visionary idea and had concluded that its adoption was ‘what God expected of the Church in this millennium’. Synodality, it soon emerged, was no more and no less than a key component of the vision of the Second Vatican Council: the Church is the baptised.

In February 2015, the priests of Killala diocese were in Westport on our 27th annual group-think, a valued time for reflecting on issues central to the needs of our Church and the demands of our ministry. While for many years since the Council we had lamented the ever-receding tide of Vatican Two, it was unclear from the sometimes direct, sometimes ambivalent interventions of our new pope whether he was another John XXIII figure ready to release the potential of the Great Council – or a transition figure, a blip on the slow descent into what had begun to appear, under Francis’ predecessors, a long and lingering backward look to the nineteenth century.

We could read the signs of the times in the increasing marginalisation of faith and church in Ireland and in Killala and we could dissect the reasons why, in church terms, the graph was slowly but surely going in the wrong direction. It seemed we were coming to a point when a cliff-face was looming in the near distance. The inevitable conclusion emerging from both the incontrovertible evidence to hand and from our own direct experience was that

1 Killala diocese is one of the smallest dioceses in Ireland, 22 parishes in north Mayo and west Sligo with a total Catholic population of 36,051. Of the 27 priests in parish work, three are not diocesan – though there are also three Killala priests working outside the diocese. There are 10 retired priests. Of the 27 working priests, one is under 40, five are under 60, 21 are over 60.

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we ‘needed to do something’ or more accurately that ‘something should be done’.

It was a telling distinction because we realised that, even if we knew what to do, we wouldn’t be able to do it ourselves because the current model of the Church, even if we wished it to continue, was unsustainable. The obvious and irrefutable conclusion was that the future of our parishes, if there was to be a future at all, would be in the hands of lay Catholics.

The Killala clergy spent two years – 2015-2017 – mulling over what the future needed to be like. We looked at the Limerick synodal experience; we investigated the few diocesan ‘listening processes’ operative at the time; we reflected on our own experience when we adopted the Dublin diocesan Parish Development and Renewal process back in the early 1990s; we sat at the feet of an impressive range of speakers dissecting the social, cultural and religious influences of the day; and we analysed the resources and personnel at our disposal in future years.

In February 2017, we decided, on the basis that we still weren’t quite sure what to do and that even if we were we wouldn’t be able to do it, that (i) we would ask the people what they wanted; (ii) we would work with them in making it happen; and, (iii) we would reassure them that the priests would support them. The three proposals were formally put to the priests who voted in favour by the closest any vote could get to unanimity. The process was called *Placing Hope in Faith*, in deference to the centrality of both faith and hope in its provenance.

A CREDIBLE START

A steering group was established in February, 2017. Each deanery was represented by two women, one layman and a priest and co-opted were Bishop John Fleming and a priest coordinator – in all, 18 members – eight lay-women, four lay-men, five priests and Bishop John Fleming. Almost immediately a problem arose. Was the agenda open? Was everything up for discussion? What about hot button issues like the ordination of women, mandatory clerical celibacy and LGBTQ+ teaching?

A distinction was drawn between what changes a diocese could implement and what were the prerogative of the global Church. While this distinction was accepted by the committee, the dilemma was that if the agenda was not open then the process would have little credibility. Asking people what they thought, and at the same time telling them what they couldn’t discuss, would have the dramatic effect of clearing the room. The problem was resolved when Bishop Fleming gave a commitment that whatever was decided that was within the authority of the diocese

to implement would become diocesan policy and that what was beyond the authority of the diocese to change he would bring to the Irish bishops and would send to the Papal Nuncio to forward to Pope Francis.

The question the committee was addressing was, in effect, whether the process would be *real, respectful and transparent* – three words that became the touchstone governing the decisions that followed. It was a template that ensured the process was credible, that it was meant to do and would do what it said it set out to do. In other words, that this was a serious effort to carry through to completion and implementation the wishes of the people of the diocese. And that in doing so that there was an awareness and an acceptance that other listening processes had been subjected to manipulation, consciously or unconsciously, by church leaders.

In September 2017, the committee undertook an analysis of priest numbers and a Mass attendance survey. The *first* indicated that within less than two decades there would be 7 or so priests for the 22 parishes of the diocese – with the vast majority in their late 60s or 70s. The *second*, based on a head count on three successive weekends, concluded that religious practice – in the sense of attendance at weekend Masses – was around 29%.

SURVEY

In November, the committee decided that a survey should be undertaken in every parish to elicit the opinion of the people and that its results should be voted on in a diocesan gathering or assembly. It was agreed that the survey would have to be anonymous and confidential, if we were to find out what people really thought. By December, the committee had agreed on the survey's *seven* open-ended questions, based on our own reflection and on questions used in the Limerick Synod. They were:

1. *Where, in your everyday life, do you experience love, truth, goodness, hope and joy?*
2. *What is it that encourages you to participate in the life of your local church/parish?*
3. *What is it you find difficult about participating in the life of your local church/parish?*
4. *As a Church, what are the biggest questions we face?*
5. *What do we need to do now?*
6. *What do we need to stop doing now?*
7. *What topics would you recommend for the upcoming Diocesan Assembly?*

In January 2018, the *Placing Hope in Faith* survey was launched

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by Bishop Fleming who strongly encouraged participation from each parish. In February, to publicise the survey, the committee held meetings in every parish with Parish Pastoral Councils (PPCs) and their priests and from then until April survey sheets were distributed in every parish.

For the survey to reach the gold standard of credibility – that it would be ‘real, respectful and transparent’ – it was clear that it would have to be anonymous and confidential in order to elicit as truthful a picture as possible and that it should be open to everyone in every parish (apart from young children). Surveys and their accompanying envelopes, in which on completion they were individually sealed, were distributed widely in every parish through PPCs, where they existed, or where they did not exist, through other agencies. A total of 1,457 completed questionnaires were returned – adult surveys comprising 1,101 and young people 356.

In May, in order to underline the importance of accurately surfacing the data that emerged from the survey and ensuring that its processing and analysis was undertaken by a reputable, independent and professional agency, the GESERA *Institute for Action Research* from Lisselton, Co. Kerry (GIAR) was employed.

In June, the report produced by GIAR was sifted into 129 proposals under 14 areas of interest– in no particular order: 1. *General* 2. *Family* 3. *Youth* 4. *Women in the Church* 5. *Lay Participation* 6. *Management of parishes* 7. *Child Safeguarding* 8. *Education in the Faith* 9. *Pastoral Care & Priests* 10. *Vocations* 11. *Prayer* 12. *Liturgy* 13. *Deacons* 14. *Inclusion*.

DIOCESAN ASSEMBLY

After the survey results were processed we had a list of 129 proposals which represented the views of the people on what needed to happen in 14 different categories. We now needed a process by which the 129 proposals could be voted on to establish how in each category the proposals could be prioritised – in other words, in what order they might be implemented. To establish a credible decision-making process to achieve that aim, 300 delegates from the 22 parishes were chosen by their PPCs and, together with the priests of the diocese as well as representatives of other church groupings, they gathered in Ballina on July 1, 2018 for the first Diocesan Assembly.

Bishop Fleming welcomed the delegates and outlined the work of the day:

The Diocesan Assembly today will decide on the blueprint for a Diocesan Pastoral Plan for the coming years. It will mean

that Bishop, priests and people working together will adopt a strategy for how the portion of the People of God who live in this diocese will face the future. A number of issues have arisen which we are unable to put into practice. These will be forwarded to the Vatican and the Irish Bishops Conference for their attention. The remainder of the issues, which have emerged from the consultation process are outlined in the document and will be voted on today at the Assembly. The issues which win the approval of the Assembly will then become part of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan.

The diocesan assembly was a unique occasion, an historic day for the diocese with, for the first time in history, a gathering of people, priests and bishop together setting the agenda and marking out the ground for a way forward and in faith and in hope determined to create and sustain the momentum needed to move the diocese and the parishes on a synodal pathway into the future.

It was also a clear statement that the sacrament of baptism was, as the Second Vatican Council contended, an equalising and determining factor between parishioners and priests and, in terms of parish management, trumped the earlier priority of ordination. Just as ‘the priesthood of all the baptised’ in Vatican Two-speak means that it’s not just the priest who celebrates the Eucharist but all the baptised who celebrate with him, the gathering for the diocesan assembly was a public statement representing our belief that every baptised person has both a right and a responsibility to exercise a joint leadership in our Church. Pope Francis, I suspect, would have been well pleased by this exercise in synodality.

To continue the emphasis on confidentiality and to ensure that the process was completely private, an independent firm was contracted to supply a system of electronic voting when, on assembly day, the delegates were asked to prioritise five or six proposals to be implemented in order of preference in each category. Each delegate keyed in his or her preference and in seconds the results appeared on a screen. Thus the voting was both private and confidential and experienced as private and confidential with parishioners seated beside parish priests, each voting privately and independently of one another.

Among the general principles voted on by the assembly were:

That a listening ethos be given an on-going and structured status in the diocese allowing for a respectful platform to the voice of the people.

For 89% Against 11%

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That transparency, inclusivity and consensus be accepted as foundation stones in diocesan and parish policies and concerns.

For 91% Against 9%

That the role of the Church in bringing the community together be respected through community-building initiatives organised by PPCs

For 91% Against 9%

Here are just *two* examples of the voting that prioritised the implementation of proposals under the headings of ‘Family’ and ‘Women in the Church’.

Regarding Family, the assembly decided, in order of priority:

1. *That a Family/Children’s Mass be introduced in every parish as a matter of priority*
2. *That experts in social media be invited to speak to families on its dangers*
3. *That the diocese explore the possibility of providing family grief support*
4. *That a diocesan forum should be established to review how families can be supported*
5. *That family pilgrimages and retreats within Ireland should be established and encouraged*
6. *That events like the Garden Party at the Bishop’s House be continued.*

Regarding Women in the Church, the assembly decided, in order of priority:

1. *That the current culture of misogyny be recognised and erased*
2. *That the diocese adopts a policy of inclusion in all areas of pastoral activity including the participation of women in leadership discussions regarding the future of the Church in the diocese*
3. *That gender balance be a basic strategy in the formation of parish and diocesan bodies and officer-ship within those bodies*
4. *That a Focus Group be established to see the roles women can play in the operation and governance of the Church at local and diocesan level*
5. *That the diocese establishes a Focus Group to explore the language in the Sunday Readings in regard to women and find what changes if any can be made*

6. *That a series of lectures on 'Feminism in the Catholic Church' be organised*

There were *eight* other categories with corresponding five or six proposals in each:

Youth; Lay participation; Education in the Faith; Vocations; Prayer; Liturgy/Deacons; Inclusion; and Management of parishes.

But first we had to ask the *How?* question. How could we begin to implement 129 proposals across ten categories?

THE *HOW?* QUESTION

With the diocesan assembly, we had determined *what* the people of the diocese wanted to see happen under ten different headings as well as *the order* in which they wanted their proposals to be implemented. The next question was to determine *how* that implementation would take place.

Ten Focus Groups were established involving a total of 120 people who addressed *how* the implementation was going to take place. It was the task of the Focus Groups to focus on the areas and issues identified in the Diocesan Assembly and to prepare them for implementation as part of a pastoral plan.

This involved (i) taking the priorities voted by delegates at the assembly as *the* effective agenda for the diocese (ii) teasing out the priorities with a view to establishing how they might be implemented (iii) placing a focus on what can *practically* be done (iv) establishing goals and focusing on action not on further discussion.

Among the questions addressed by the Focus Groups were: (i) is this proposal achievable? (ii) What can be done? (iii) How can we go about doing it? (iv) What has it going for it? (v) What (and who) are the obstacles to making it happen? (vi) Is there any background preparation we need to make? (vii) Do we need to get any more information? (viii) Are there aspects we need to examine in more detail?

The Focus Groups held several meetings and when they had presented their reports, we knew the answer, not just to the *'What?'* but to the *'How?'* question'.

Under the Focus Groups, the original 129 proposals under 14 headings were refined down to 72 under ten headings. Moderators (or leaders) and secretaries were appointed to each Focus Group with their roles specified with an emphasis on driving forward the operation of the groups.

In January 2020, an Implementation Committee was appointed to encourage, supervise, co-ordinate and resource the

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implementation of the 72 proposals and the committee elected *three* lay people as Leaders – Anne Sweeney, Patricia Melvin and Peter McLoughlin – to head, on behalf of the group, the implementation of the 72 proposals.

The *implementation agenda* got underway in January 2020 when two proposals to be presented to the four deaneries were ambushed by the arrival of COVID which side-lined the process for the following two years. The two proposals were (i) the contemporaneous election of new PPCs in every parish with training workshops to be provided to enhance their effectiveness and (ii) that a Family/Children’s Mass be introduced in every parish (or number of parishes) as a matter of priority.

The decision to start with electing new PPCs was based on the conviction that a key part of the parish scaffolding to support the synodal pathway was effective PPCs, and the belief that if a synodal pathway was going to prosper the PPC was the key platform, sponsoring reform and creating (and maintaining) momentum at local level. The Children’s Mass, already effective in some parishes, was unanimously regarded as an essential strategy in the pastoral care of children and young parents.

In recent months, after the COVID lockdowns, the implementation process has recommenced. The remaining deanery meetings took place in October, 2021 when the process was reinstated and has continued into 2022.

The election of new PPCs has now been completed, a schedule of training workshops in each parish will be completed by Easter and the new members of the 22 PPCs will be commissioned by Bishop Fleming at the Chrism Mass during Holy Week.

Finally, we are on our way.

LESSONS

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the Killala experience to date. *One* is that, while for the Catholic Church in Ireland on most indicators the graph is going in the wrong direction, there’s still a huge commitment on the part of a significant number of lay people to value and support the work of the Church, not least among young parents for whom a faith-life is important, who value a sense of God and want their children to value it too. This was evident in the interest and enthusiasm for the Diocesan Assembly and the response of the 300-plus delegates from the twenty-two parishes of the diocese, as well as the relative ease with which 120 volunteers were attracted towards participation in the ten focus groups. The important message is that there is a real hunger for a Church based on the *synodality* Pope

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Francis continuously underlines, if Catholics can see that it's being taken seriously – though many remain to be convinced. *Another* conclusion is that the key to attracting participation and commitment is to convince Catholics that the process respects the three-fold axis mentioned earlier – *'real, respectful and transparent'*. Key elements in the Killala experience were that the survey was confidential (and seen to be so); that the results were independently computed (and known to be so); and that commitments were given in terms of an open agenda and a follow-through (and taken on trust). An instance of that trust and the honesty that ensued was evident in the delegates' response to some of the issues beyond the diocese's capacity to implement but on which they registered their opinions:

that priests be allowed to marry: agree 85%, disagree: 1%; that priests who have married return to active ministry: agree 81%, disagree: 19%; that women be ordained to the diaconate: agree 80%, disagree: 20%; that women be ordained to the priesthood: 69%, disagree: 31%; that the Church's teaching on homosexuality and those excluded from the Church be changed to reflect the inclusion of all people regardless of sexual orientation, marital status or family status: agree: 86%, disagree: 14%.

CONCLUSION

To make another beginning, a number of constituent elements seems vital. *One* is that *change* has to be acknowledged and accepted as a permanent condition, allowing for the development of doctrine despite the fact that tradition, continuity, heritage remain important influences. *Two*, the future of the Catholic Church in Ireland depends primarily on empowering lay Catholics and all who see the synodal pathway with its emphasis on attentive listening to all voices and a journeying together that is 'real, respectful and transparent' as the only game in town. *Three*, moving towards a synodal pathway means accepting the cultural imperative that the pre-Vatican 'pyramid' model of Church is no longer fit for purpose and its clericalist and patriarchal ethos are, in today's culture, a counter-sign to gospel values. *Four*, there is a genuine thirst for meaning among those for whom faith in God as mediated by our Church seems impossibly remote from the lived reality of their lives. *Five*, we need to learn 'to live in the grey', to recognise the reality of variety, complexity and ambivalence in the lives of many Catholics today – faith, for many, possibly for most, is not 'simple'. *Six*, across the wide spectrum of belief and unbelief, there needs to be respect and reverence for the individual journey.

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All that said, we don't know where the synodal journey will take us, where God's Spirit is leading. What we do know is that, if we want to listen to all voices, the road ahead will be bumpy, the task is not going to be easy. But, we know too, that if we work *together*, walk *together*, discuss and discern *together*, we can achieve great things – *together*. We have and we can.

May God's Spirit continue to guide and direct us on the journey.

Freedom. We were born free and with our eyes open. God destined us to live as free, joyful people summed up in the words of Jesus who said, '*I came that you may have life, life in all its fullness*' (John 10:10). That life should be one that is free from poverty, oppression, ignorance, violence and discrimination. The fullness of life makes us free from superstition, worry and negativity. The longing to be free is a noble lifelong venture yet the only one befitting our human nature. But to free oneself or assist in liberating others involves taking risks, being suspicious of the status quo, leaving the safety of the shore and launching out into the deep and the unknown. This is a very lonely calling too as one immerses oneself into the whole of reality with courage to confront and listen. Yet, the calling is not to be the liberator of the oppressed but to make a commitment to fight alongside them, as Paulo Freire wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Yet that journey of liberation is also fraught with doubts, failures and fears, but that is understandable since the struggle for liberation is much greater than our knowledge and experience of it. Indeed, acknowledging that truth is both liberating and humbling in itself. Work for justice endures when we share a deep faith in the God who liberates the downtrodden. Faith in God requires that we also trust his people's ability to articulate their oppression and identify their needs while encouraging them to mobilise for the change that they yearn for.

– GABRIEL DOLAN, *Undaunted: Stories of Freedom in a Shackled Society*, (Kenya, Zand Graphics), 2021, p. 13.